

## *Acoustic Ecology & Soundwalking*

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World forum for Acoustic Ecology

<http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/wfae/home/>

Introductory resources:

<http://www.matthewsansom.info/teaching/ug/ss/ss.htm>

An Introduction to Acoustic Ecology – Kendall Wrightson

<http://cec.concordia.ca/econtact/naisa/introduction.html>

### **Acoustic Ecology / Ecoacoustics**

Interdisciplinary – acoustics, architecture, town-planning, landscape architecture, sound recording, composition, spirituality, ecology, etc...

Founder: R Murray Schafer, composer, musician, Professor of Communication Studies (SFU, Canada)

Suggested that we try to hear the acoustic environment as a musical composition and further, that we own responsibility for its composition

Argued for listening skills to become part of the national curriculum: list any five environmental sounds (not music) that you remember hearing today; and list five sounds (not music) you like and five you do not.

Schafer's response to the problem was to develop a range of "ear cleaning" exercises including "soundwalks," a walking meditation where the object is to maintain a high level of sonic awareness

Handbook of Acoustic Ecology

<http://www2.sfu.ca/sonic-studio/handbook/>

Formalised soundscape terminology: e.g. background sounds as "keynotes" (in analogy to music where a keynote identifies the fundamental tonality of a composition around which the music modulates); foreground sounds (intended to attract attention) are termed "sound signals." Sounds that are particularly regarded by a community and its visitors are called "soundmarks" - in analogy to landmarks. Natural examples of the latter include geysers, waterfalls and wind traps while cultural examples include distinctive bells and the sounds of traditional activities.

The idea that the sound of a particular locality (its keynotes, sound signals and soundmarks) can - like local architecture, customs and dress - express a community's identity to the extent that settlements can be recognised and characterised by their soundscapes.

Since the industrial revolution, however, an ever increasing number of unique

soundscapes have disappeared completely or submerged into the cloud of homogenised, anonymous noise that is the contemporary city soundscape, with its ubiquitous keynote - traffic.

Hi-fi / low-fi: He defines a hi-fi soundscape as an environment where “sounds overlap less frequently; there is more perspective—foreground and background”

While the hi-fi soundscape is - Acoustic Ecologists suggest - balanced in terms of level, spectra and rhythm, the lo-fi soundscape features an almost constant level. This creates a “Sound Wall”, isolating the listener from the environment.

Spectrally, the contemporary lo-fi soundscape is biased towards the low frequency range (thanks to the internal combustion engine and sounds related to electric power). Due to the twenty-four hour society, the rhythms of daily routine are, in some localities, significantly eroded.

The psychological significance of sound used as a controlling force - as an (offensive) weapon or as a (defensive) barrier against the soundscape - is that the environment and the community become the enemy. As with any war, the environment becomes a battleground and suffers as much as its inhabitants. Schafer estimated that the battle between sonic expression and control was helping to increase environmental sound levels by around 0.5 to 1 decibel per year.

If community and environmental noise is the enemy without, the noise of unwanted thoughts and feelings represents the enemy within. The use of sound as an “audioanalgesic” - a soundwall to block the unceasing (and often critical) inner dialogue and the uncomfortable emotions the dialogue evinces - provides the illusion of mastery over emotion.

As the city represents excitement, so the countryside, the plains and wilderness areas have come, for many, to represent boredom and incredibly, a disconnection from life, since “life” has become associated with continuous noise and activity.

The corollary to this is that “quiet” and highly differentiated environments - characteristics of hi-fi soundscapes - are equated with boredom, conformity, lassitude, lack of choice “... and most importantly, the fear of being out of touch.” (Newman & Lonsdale 1995, 10).

The latter expression is a masterly example of sophistry since while being “in touch” with the noise of opinion and technology (objectivity), the quiet reality of how “I” feel now (subjectivity) - is devalued or ignored.

Schafer suggests that there are two ways to improve the soundscape. The first is to increase sonological competence through an education programme that attempts to imbue new generations with an appreciation of environmental sound.

This he believes will foster a new approach to design- the second way- that will incorporate an appreciation of sound and thus reduce the wasted energy that noise represents.

In order to listen we need to stop or at least slow down - physically and psychologically,

Critique of WSP: 'experts' with expert agenda

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## **Ear-cleaning: Soundwalking**

Hildegard Westerkamp

<http://www.sfu.ca/~westerka/>

Soundwalking - Hildegard Westerkamp

<http://cec.concordia.ca/econtact/Soundwalk/Soundwalking.htm>

R Murray Schafer interview/soundwalk

<http://www.arteradio.com/son.html?22427>

<http://www2.sfu.ca/sonic-studio/handbook/Soundwalk.html>

A form of active participation in the soundscape. Though the variations are many, the essential purpose of the soundwalk is to encourage the participant to listen discriminatively, and moreover, to make critical judgments about the sounds heard and their contribution to the balance or imbalance of the sonic environment.

In order to expand the listening experience, *soundmaking* may also become an important part of a soundwalk. Its purpose is to explore sounds that are related to the environment, and, on the other hand, to become aware of one's own sounds (voice, footsteps, etc.) in the environmental context. A soundwalk may be scored in the form of a map which the participant uses both to guide the route and draw attention to features of acoustic interest. The map may also act as a score, directing the performer's listening and soundmaking activities in a way that is not limited to a specific locale.

Hildegard Westerkamp says "A soundwalk is any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is exposing our ears to every sound around us no matter where we are. We may be at home, we may be walking across a downtown street, through a park, along the beach; we may be sitting in a doctor's office..."

Walking (moving through space and time)

Listening

Composing (directing your body, attention, microphone)

Interacting

Documenting (maps)

De/Reconstructing

Reading:

Schafer, R Murray (1993) *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Destiny Books)

Norman, K (2004) *Sounding Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate), *Chapter 4 & CD excerpts*